

WHEN DOMESTIC ANIMALS LEAVE THE COMMODITY WORLD: VALUE AND INDIVIDUALITY OF ANIMALS IN POSTSOCIALIST MONGOLIA

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We discuss what domestic animals mean for pastoralists in postsocialist Mongolia, by examining how herders evaluate animals and identify them individually. The pastoral regions of Mongolia have been impacted by macro socioeconomic changes, such as the collectivization of animal husbandry, begun in the second half of the 1950s, and privatization, which began in the 1990s. During these periods, animals have been traded, in theory, as commodities. As a food source, a means of exchange, and as production capital under the current market economy, animals have become the most important property of herders, especially since the transformation of economic systems. However, some animals have been recognized not only as commodities, but also as unique individuals. An individual animal may evoke memories of a person or a group of people who have shared common experiences in the past. However, herders tend to claim that they raise animals only for eating, suggesting that they refrain from becoming emotionally attached to any particular animal. Nonetheless, although the economic base may change, animal husbandry is an everyday practice involving direct human–animal interaction. Through such interaction, some animals might be identified individually and no longer considered a commodity. In addition to serving as the basis of subsistence in a market economy, domestic animals may be used as gifts, or kept out of the market due to localized cultural value.

Keywords: commodity, domestic animals, individuality, memory, postsocialist Mongolia